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Asbestos clinic to break away from hospital

Special to The Montanian
by K.C. Hoyer

The Center for Asbestos Related Disease (CARD) advisory board announced Sept. 12 that it will be working with St. John's Lutheran Hospital to move the CARD into a separate not-for-profit entity to be unaffiliated with the hospital. The transition is targeted to be complete by March 31, 2003.



Brad Black

"Our intent is to keep our focus on patient care, while expanding our work in research," said Brad Black, MD, of the CARD clinic. "Rural hospitals are not set up to handle major research projects, and we can't get some of the available grant funding if we're part of the hospital. Being a separate organization will give us more flexibility to branch into different areas and get the federal dollars we need. It's another step in the evolution of the CARD, and we are excited about it."

The CARD advisory board has been working with hospital trustees to assess the need for the change and begin planning the changes necessary to make it work, according to LeRoy Thom, board member.

"We have had a lot of support from the hospital to branch out and continue the evolution of the CARD clinic," said Thom. "What started as a temporary service to help people understand their screening reports has now expanded and it's time for the CARD to be on its own."

The CARD clinic has been supported financially by the hospital since it opened in May 2000. Contributions to the hospital from W.R. Grace were used for this support.

The clinic also billed the Grace Libby Medical Plan for some of its services, but for the most part, did not bill any other insurance plans, or any patients.

Because services given to patients have cost more than the available funding, the CARD advisory board has had to begin their transition with some specific changes to make the CARD financially sustainable long-term.

Beginning Oct. 15, 2002, the clinic will adopt normal billing policies, according to Rick Palagi, CEO at St. John's. This means insurance will be billed when applicable and the patients will be responsible for co-pays and any unpaid services, just as they would with any other provider.

"As with any medical bill, if a person is financially unable to pay, we will explore every avenue of assistance," said Palagi. "We want to help those who need our services, no matter what. We just have to

start running this clinic like other businesses so we can stay in business long term. If that means billing Medicare or Blue Cross, then that's what we need to do."

Hospital board members will continue to work to find sources of long-term funding for direct patient care, including at the CARD clinic, according to Kerry Beasley, SJLH board chair.

"We want to make it clear that, although the CARD may be a separate organization, the hospital is still committed to making sure that long-term, direct patient care is available and funded," said Beasley. "We will continue to work on the White Lung Program efforts, and other plans for a Libby Medical Trust. In the meantime, if we receive any further contributions from W.R. Grace, you have our promise that every dime of that will go to pay for direct patient care for people with asbestos related diseases."

This direct patient care may be for services at the CARD clinic or for medical care in the hospital, Beasley said.

"Asbestos patients have had over \$1 million in care at St. John's in the past year," said Beasley. "Many of those patients don't have insurance or the means to pay their bills. Donations that are intended for asbestos patients will help make up that difference and will be used to help people pay for their direct care needs."

A team of people from the CARD advisory board and the hospital are beginning work on legal and logistical details for changing the CARD to its own organization. Community input is welcome and can be given through any of the members including LeRoy Thom, John Richter, Alvin Benitz or Kerry Beasley.

(K.C. Hoyer is an employee of St. John's Lutheran Hospital.)